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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Orientation and Crafted Bureaucracy: Finding Dignity in Nicaraguan Food Safety

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Nading Orientation and Crafted Bureaucracy

ABSTRACT This article explores how food safety inspectors (*hygienistas*) in Nicaragua monitor and certify foodservice workers and facilities. While inspectors are well versed in sanitary law, they describe their job not as law enforcement but as “orientation.” Orientation integrates state regulation with interpersonal exchanges of gifts and jokes, which reinforce unwritten social norms. Such interpersonal exchanges are not simply signs of corruption or governmental incapacity. Rather, orientation is a form of “crafted bureaucracy”: a pragmatic effort to ensure both the quality of food and the quality of governmental encounters. Orientation allows inspectors and food producers to reconcile memories of Nicaragua’s revolutionary past with anxieties about the country’s more recent integration into a global food economy. While effective surveillance is at stake in orientation, dignity is also at stake. When orientation is successful, the dignity of both bureaucrats and food workers is temporarily affirmed. When orientation fails, their dignity is at risk. [*public health, hygiene, medical anthropology, infrastructure, Latin America*]

Doña Mariana was one of two state *hygienistas* (food safety inspectors) in Ciudad Sandino, a community of about 100,000 residents on the outskirts of Managua, Nicaragua. One January morning she visited a small bakery, one of dozens in the city that sold rolls, triangular pastries called *picos*, and occasional birthday cakes. Its owner had applied to the Nicaraguan Ministry of

Health (*Ministerio de Salud*, henceforth MINSA) for renewal of his sanitary license. As part of the renewal, Doña Mariana had come to see how well the bakery followed the regulations outlined in Nicaragua's General Sanitary Law (*Ley General Sanitaria*).

After inspecting the facility and interviewing and observing the staff at work, Doña Mariana composed her report. She suggested both in her written notes and in her discussion with the owner that a stack of large flour sacks should be set on a pallet to stave off invasion from bugs and moisture. The owner agreed and signed the form, but as he did he drew Doña Mariana into a discussion about economic conditions. The owner predicted, based on conversations with other food makers, that the price of sugar, wheat, beans, coffee, and rice—known in Nicaragua as the basic basket (*canasta básica*)—would soon begin to rise. Doña Mariana listened attentively to his forecast. The year was 2008. If the baker was correct, the small-scale food makers she regularly inspected would soon be struggling more than usual.

As she rose to leave, Doña Mariana asked for a drink of water. She had come from the office on foot, and there were other bakeries, bars, and restaurants to visit. Doña Mariana made only a few dollars a day, and she had to provide her own transportation through a city that encompassed 10 square miles and included not only small family businesses like this one but also local outposts of large national and multinational firms. She often saved money on bus fare by walking, but going about on foot could leave one looking sweaty and feeling irritable, especially on 90-degree days like this one. The owner disappeared briefly and returned with a cup as well as a plastic bag filled with *picos*. Doña Mariana thanked him, drank the water quickly, and tucked the pastries into her purse.

“Que le vaya bien,” called the owner. Safe travels.

“*Cuidado*,” Doña Mariana responded with a smile as she stepped into the harsh light of the street. Take care.

ORIENTATION, DIGNITY, AND CRAFT

In this article, I follow higienistas through a variety of spaces, from the cramped office where they subject food-service workers to routine blood and stool tests, to the factories of local producers and multinational food companies where they carry out routine inspections. While higienistas have a deep knowledge of food safety law, they do not consider themselves law enforcers. As they explained to me and to countless food makers, “Our job is to *orient* people to the norms and regulations in the General Sanitary Law.” Hygienistas’ emphasis on orientation might reasonably be interpreted as a recognition that in countries like Nicaragua, rulebooks are rarely matched with precise measuring tools like thermometers and pH test strips. An overworked, underpaid bureaucrat can only do so much.

I argue, however, that orientation is not an admission of incapacity. It is an active engagement between bureaucrat and citizen (see Solomon 2015; Street 2012). In Spanish, as in English, “to orient” (*orientar*) means to get a sense of where one is, and where one is headed. In orientation, higienistas route formal technical and legal rules about how to ensure the quality of food through unwritten social norms about how to ensure the quality of social relations (Hoag 2011). At the bakery, a series of material and communicative exchanges that blended technical tasks into social ones—the gift of *picos*, the commiseration over economic uncertainty, and the discussion of how to store flour—were all elements of orientation. In other situations, orientation might include jokes and nonverbal gestures. As a form of what I call “crafted bureaucracy,” orientation closes the distance—and potential dissonance—between the work of bureaucrats and

the work of food producers. A view of bureaucracy as craft can provide insight into how a sense of shared dignity might be built into the conduct of government.¹

In a range of anthropological accounts, people's encounters with street-level bureaucrats—those who work on the front lines of state, corporate, or development institutions—have been characterized as threats to dignity. In some cases, overworked street-level bureaucrats can feel pressed to “psychologically simplify” and “mass process” their clientele, discounting individual stories of pain and suffering (Herzfeld 1992; Lipsky 2010, xii; Scherz 2011; Ticktin 2011). In other cases, bureaucrats resolve the problems of overwork and under-resourcing through extortion or discrimination (Gupta 2012; Hoag 2014). In either case, the quality of governance appears to suffer. Ethnography can provide insights into how people work to restore dignity after bureaucratic encounters (e.g., Bourgois 1995; Hoffman and Coffey 2008). For example, Webb Keane describes how, after a “government cattle inspector . . . roughed him up,” a Sumbanese man “sponsored a big feast” in which gifts and public displays of respect helped restore his lost *dewa*, a Sumbanese concept akin to dignity (2015, 116).

What the hygienistas call “orientation” is an effort by bureaucrats themselves to confront the potential for governmental encounters to threaten dignity. In Nicaragua, as in Sumba, exchanges and displays of respect are central to this effort, but in orientation such exchanges and displays are integral parts of (rather than corrective responses to) the bureaucratic encounter (see Heyman 1995). When orientation succeeds (and, as I show below, its success is never guaranteed), the dignity of both bureaucrats and food producers is temporarily affirmed. When orientation fails, their dignity is at risk.

In reconsidering the relationship between dignity and bureaucracy, I follow Jeanette Pols, who conceives of dignity as the capacity to participate in “aesthetic genres” (2013a). Aesthetic

genres include norms about how to exchange gifts, sentiments, and jokes. Varying across cultural contexts, aesthetic genres sustain ideas about etiquette and taste, including the taste of food. As Andrew Sayer has argued, while dignity is often construed as individualized autonomy or self-respect, “in everyday life,” dignity is relational, “signaled in comportment, eye contact, and bodily control” (2011, 191–92). For higienistas, the technical and material task of monitoring food production is inextricably entangled with the social task of telling jokes and giving gifts.

It is important to clarify here the relationship between the kinds of material and communicative exchanges I describe in this article and acts of bribery or extortion. To be sure, corruption is a problem in Nicaragua. The political affiliations of presidents and parliaments have shifted several times since the popular-leftist Sandinista Revolution overthrew an oppressive dictatorship in 1979. Through these changes, the basic structure of the country’s bureaucracies has remained stable, even if those bureaucracies have seen staff and resources shrink. Nowhere is this combination of structural stability and resource scarcity more apparent than in MINSA (Birn, Zimmerman, and Garfield 2000). Amid the revolution’s partially fulfilled promises to improve public health, as well as an uncertain future of global market integration, threats to what Nicaraguans call dignified work (*trabajo digno*) abound (Fisher 2013, 552). Threats to the integrity of state institutions, in the form of blatant corruption, are also present. Enacted within shared spaces of work, such as the offices and kitchens where higienistas meet food producers, orientation serves as a reminder that “making a living is equally about . . . being part of a collective that gives meaning to life” (Narotzky and Besnier 2014, S6).

Orientation, then, is not only a way of ensuring that food is minimally safe for consumption; it is also an effort to render cooking, selling, and bureaucratically accounting for food commensurable as forms of dignified work.² As I hope to show by highlighting the value of

orientation to hygienistas and others in urban Nicaragua, “good governance” does not always mean the eradication of those extralegal exchanges (like gifts) that sometimes lubricate the wheels of bureaucracy. Orientation is not a moral corrective or binary alternative to bribery or coercion. Rather, orientation is an effort to align ideas about the quality of shared social experiences like eating and joking and commiserating to the quality of technical, governmental encounters.

Although technical standards such as the General Sanitary Law are designed to protect people, consumers and producers often see those standards as undermining historically and geographically particular ideas about “good” ways of making food (Bingham and Lavau 2012; Buckley 2015). The concept of craft helps bridge this divide between standards and aesthetics. For example, Heather Paxson (2012) shows how craft cheese makers refuse to separate the hygienic challenges of working with raw milk from the aesthetic challenges of producing taste. Both the possible flavors of cheese and its safety for human consumption are constrained—but not determined—by acidity, milkfat, and temperature. It is in the space those constraints leave open that cheese becomes dignified food: both good to make and good to eat (Paxson 2012, 5). What I am calling “crafted bureaucracy” is a form of state power that is both good to wield and good to encounter. Whereas the goodness of craft food is produced in mutually satisfying scenes of eating and feeding, the goodness of crafted bureaucracy is produced in mutually satisfying scenes of inspection and surveillance.

In making this argument I bring together two recent anthropological discussions. The first concerns how (and whether) states “care” for their citizens (Gupta 2012; Hetherington 2011; Singh 2015). Meeting the obligation to ensure population health tends to require, among other things, a system for bureaucratically monitoring people and spaces. Bureaucrats embody a

contradiction between the duty to generate population-level knowledge through surveillance and the need to express concern for individuals (Gupta 1995; Scott 1998). Amid this contradiction they struggle to be seen as both sensitive and worthy of being “taken seriously” as dignified professionals (Sayer 2011, 197). This struggle is most palpable, perhaps, in police, social workers, and welfare officers who meet vulnerable populations: children, the poor, the mentally disabled, or the injured (Biehl 2005; Brodwin 2013; Gupta 2001). In such encounters, joking, giving gifts, and other deviations from protocol can seem like threats to equal treatment and even to fundamental individual dignity, or *humanitas* (Pols 2013a, 2013b). Ethnographic evidence shows, however, that unscripted exchanges and appeals to unwritten social norms are commonplace in the everyday work of bureaucracy (Cardoso de Oliveira 2013; Ghertner 2010; Huising and Silbey 2011).

The second discussion comes from medical anthropology, where care is increasingly being framed not as a moral correlate to technical duties but rather as an integral part of “tinkering” with protocols (Mol 2008; Mol, Moser, and Pols 2010). In homes and clinics, deviations from protocol are essential to establishing bonds across divides in experience, knowledge, and capability (Andaya 2009; Buch 2014; Garcia 2010; Livingston 2012). Care may preserve individual dignity, or *humanitas*, but more importantly, it restores what Pols calls *dignitas*, or the capacity to participate socially in eating, joking, and exchanging gifts (Pols 2013a, 2013b).³ Unlike *humanitas*, which is a universal human good that must be preserved, *dignitas* is a social good that must be collectively, deliberately crafted (Robbins 2013, 457).

How, then, might orientation be analytically distinct? Unlike care as it has predominantly been discussed in the anthropology of bureaucracies or medicine, orientation is not an attempt to directly address bodily or economic vulnerability. In Nicaragua, hygienistas do not expect (and

are not expected) to alleviate inequality or social suffering. Rather, they seek to identify and affirm shared experience, knowledge, and capabilities. Orientation is neither a way of putting sanitary regulations “into context” nor merely the social or affective “value added” to a technical protocol (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 86; see also Hoag 2011; Hull 2008). Rather, it is a way of building dignity into the very process of governmental surveillance and audit. To be sure, sanitarians, even in wealthy countries, are frequently pressed for time and resources (Bingham and Lavau 2012). As in anthropological studies of care, however, attention to hygiene in a place with Nicaragua’s history of revolutionary solidarity and chronic resource deficits may highlight the more generalized importance of craft to bureaucratic practice (Livingston 2012).

CRAFTING CERTIFICATES

Between 2006 and 2015, I periodically shadowed Doña Mariana and her coworker, Doña Feliciano, in their office. I attended staff meetings, reviewed state and municipal sanitary laws, and joined them in what they called “fieldwork” (*trabajo de campo*). People in Ciudad Sandino obtain food through nonmonetary swaps of homemade beans for homemade tortillas, as well as through cash and credit purchases of meat, rice, vegetables, and cheese. Ingredients might come on one day from nearby farms or bakeries that make artisanal foods (*comidas artesanales*), and on another day from a trip to the local supermarket, Palí (a subsidiary of Wal-Mart), where packaged and processed brand-name items (*comidas de marca*) are on offer. The hygienistas are responsible for overseeing this landscape. In each Nicaraguan municipality, a group of two to four hygienistas constitutes the first line of encounter between food producers and the state. They are responsible for filing regular reports with the local MINSA epidemiologist, their immediate supervisor. If they find violations of the General Sanitary Law, they can withhold licenses to produce food.

Both Doña Mariana and Doña Feliciana are in their early 50s. Both are easily recognizable as state functionaries. They wear a standard outfit each day: black slacks or skirt and tan blouse or shirt. (The higienistas with whom I worked in Ciudad Sandino were all women, though I do not know if this was typical across Nicaragua.) Their form of dress—an aesthetic genre in itself—distinguishes them from nurses (white uniforms), doctors (formal dress with white coats), and auxiliaries (some combination of surgical scrub attire).

Everyone who works in the Ciudad Sandino health center agrees that the Office of Hygiene is the least desirable workspace in the complex. It is located in a concrete cubicle, surrounded on one side by the cacophonous waiting room, and on the other three sides by hallways filled with patients and their families. The only ventilation comes from the glass slit windows that open into the hallway. Still, the office is an appropriate place to get oriented, in time and space, to the contingencies of Nicaraguan food safety.

Elizabeth Dunn (2008) has described how food safety took on new political significance in Eastern Europe when socialism gave way to market capitalism. Both Doña Feliciana and Doña Mariana have vivid memories of Nicaragua's own socialist period, an ambitious political and economic restructuring spurred by the revolution (1979–1990). During this period, the governing Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) gave MINSA the structure it has today. MINSA led campaigns for vaccination and primary care, as well as health-education programs that gave the public (particularly in cities) a high degree of awareness about pathogens (Garfield and Williams 1992). A populist appeal to bureaucratic “transparency” in state activity was paralleled (and enabled) by an effort to make microbial threats visible (Hetherington 2011). The revolution began to “pasteurize” the nation (Latour 1993), often explicitly in the name of

restoring a dignity that had been compromised by the Somoza-family dictatorship that ruled the country for the previous four decades.

By the time I first met the higienistas in 2006, however, the revolution had been over for 16 years. A series of right-leaning governments began imposing health-service fees and cutting employee rolls, while reorienting the economy to export and free trade (Babb 2001; Birn, Zimmerman, and Garfield 2000). Those bureaucrats who remained in their jobs (including the higienistas) were able to stay thanks mostly to seniority and the continued influence of public-sector labor unions established under the FSLN. When the FSLN returned to power in 2006 under President Daniel Ortega, it promised a populist revival of public services, part of a more general effort to recover “national dignity.”⁴ While the business-friendly economic policies have continued under Ortega, this public-sector strengthening has been halting at best.

Gestures to Nicaragua’s revolutionary past and its market-oriented present mingle in the cramped space of the higienistas’ office. On its walls when I visited in 2007, hand-drawn charts tracking the progress of sanitary inspections hung alongside pastel-colored posters promoting the FSLN’s slogan, “citizen power” (*poder ciudadano*). Above one of the desks was a handbill distributed by the local municipal authority, depicting, somewhat jarringly, the former Marxist-guerrilla President Ortega reviewing the plans for Ciudad Sandino’s newest economic project: a massive North American-owned apparel factory located in a free-trade zone (*zona franca*).

Each morning, starting around seven o’clock, either Doña Mariana or Doña Feliciana begins processing health certificates (*certificados de salud*) for foodservice workers. Anyone who is formally employed in Nicaragua’s food sector must possess such a certificate. Part of the certification process is a fecal exam. This is a basic procedure to identify intestinal parasites. The

fecal exam goes along with a blood test for malaria and HIV. Each licensed worker's bodily substances must pass through this series of diagnostic tests.

Health certificate processing entails a good deal of paperwork. There is a standard, stamped form for each applicant, but paper forms are also required to track biomaterial as it moves through laboratories and comes back as results. The small piece of paper that includes information about human blood and stool has to be recreated nearly every morning in the stuffy office. To do this, the higienistas cut scraps of letter-sized paper into fourths and pre-stamp each of them, creating a stack of neat, blank cards. Space prevents a full discussion of the kind of resource conservation and internal negotiation required to obtain this paper, but suffice it to say that sanitary information is mostly handcrafted. Only at this point, after crafting, are the higienistas ready to receive a health certificate applicant.

A typical encounter goes something like this: There is a timid knock at the door, which, despite the heat, is always kept shut.

“Come in (*pase*),” says Doña Mariana languidly, in a voice no louder than normal speaking level.

There is a louder knock.

“Come in!” This time she answers in a welcoming, high-pitched tone, followed by a knowing giggle, shared among those in the office. Here, laughter has an orienting effect. By conveying the higienistas' comfort with what is about to happen, it gives them a dignified position from which to manage the encounter (see Livingston 2012, 119–51). The higienistas, both women, are about to begin an intimate discussion with strangers, many of whom will be younger men, about blood and feces. The laughter, then, might stave off a mutual sense of disorientation.

The door creaks open. A slender young man peers through the crack.

“Health certificate?” he asks, hopefully. As I learned later, he more than likely first dropped in at the main reception desk, whereupon he was sent here. At that point, he had to sort himself into the queue for the hygiene office, which overlaps with the queue for general consulting.

“Yes, yes, *amor. Entre! Entre!*” From here, the encounter begins to proceed algorithmically, much like other bureaucratic exchanges. Who does he work for? Doña Mariana pulls the appropriate file from the stack. Has the man (or his employer) paid his fee at the bank down the road next to the market? If no, go and do it, then come back. If yes, hand over the receipt.

“Good. Here is what you have to do. Take this paper to the laboratory [the pre-crafted quarter-letter-sized card]. There you can get your blood test done.”

“What about a private laboratory? Can I do it in a private laboratory?” Workers are frequently anxious to avoid long lines at the public facility.

“Yes, but they must fill out the form properly,” Doña Mariana responds. “Then you need to come back tomorrow—to the laboratory here or to your private laboratory—with a fecal sample (*muestra de hece*).” The higienistas almost invariably begin the discussion of solid waste using the highbrow term *hece*, or feces.

“A what? A urine sample?”

“No, *amor*, hece—*caca*.” The synonyms for *hece* are legion. They go from the juvenile like *caca* to the more vulgar *mierda*, or “shit.”

Nervous laughter wells up. “And how do I bring it?”

The higienistas have learned from experience to explain this in detail. Over the years, they have received samples in all manner of unapproved containers, from matchboxes to shopping bags.

“In a glass or plastic container—very clean and disinfected,” Doña Mariana explains, offering an extensive list of potential vessels: old baby-food jars, discarded plastic cups, even a washed-out cassette or CD case, as long as they can be disinfected.

The phrase “very clean and disinfected” was repeated hundreds of times over the course of my hours of observation in the hygiene office, as was this general interchange. In order for the whole testing routine to work—in order for sanitary law to make “sanitary citizens”—the sample that arrives in the lab, as well as its container, has to be brought into being (Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003). To help applicants recycle glass and plastic into suitable fecal transport devices, higienistas draw on a repertoire of synonyms, intimate knowledge of household economies, and basic microbial biology.

The forms, the containers, and the substance itself are all contingent upon the higienistas’ skill at fostering orientation to offices and labs, with their routines, and houses, with theirs. The very discussion of feces seems out of place in this office, located in the middle of a hospital. But the applicant isn’t being asked to produce a sample then and there; rather, he is being instructed on how to craft a sample at home. The higienistas politely but discreetly orient each applicant to how this might be done. Drawing a sample of feces is not easy, especially when the home toilet is a pit latrine.

The communicative exchanges I witnessed in the office are difficult to evoke textually. They occurred mostly in awkward looks, silences, and laughs. I could see the higienistas pushing the applicants to contemplate the *how* of the sampling process, but I never heard Doña

Mariana or Doña Felicianita walk anyone step-by-step through the procedure for getting a bit of feces into a baby food jar. In this, they showed restraint. I could see the fragmented space of homes and neighborhoods meeting awkwardly with the fragmented space of overworked public laboratories and pay-for-play private ones. Through material and communicative craft, a sanitary infrastructure—what Peter Redfield calls “the frontline of norms” (2016, 160)—was constructed collaboratively. Those who came in search of health certificates were “doing the right thing” legally, if not technically. The joking and winking turned a situation fraught with compromise for all concerned not only into a laughing matter but also into a dignified one.

CRAFTED BUREAUCRACY

Michael Herzfeld’s (1992) seminal study of European bureaucracy shows how the institutionalization of state power parallels the formation of symbolic ideas of self/other, us/them, and purity/pollution (cf. Douglas 2002; Weber 1978). Bureaucracy is the state’s purifying apparatus. It is street-level bureaucrats who often bear responsibility for determining who is deserving of state care (Agamben 1998; Pols 2013a; Ticktin 2011). My initial question for the hygienistas was how the state “worked” at this low level. What happens, I wondered, when bureaucratic functions are partial, imperfect, or otherwise compromised? As Akhil Gupta (2012, 23) has argued, India’s fractured bureaucracy is less a source of population management than of structural violence. Its fragmentary nature materializes the dehumanizing indifference that Herzfeld identified, with painful and even deadly results for the poor. Even if bureaucrats, as individuals, are concerned for the dignity of people they encounter, their obligation as state functionaries to adhere to rigid routines under conditions of overwhelming scarcity can make their work dangerous (Lipsky 2010).

Routines are also essential to contemporary health practice. Scripts, protocols, and written regulations guide drug regimens, the proper way to disclose HIV status, and the legal procedures for providing abortion or psychiatric services (Brodwin 2013; Buchbinder et al. 2016; Nguyen 2010). In clinics, these routines are intended to manage risk, package interventions, and contain unruly bodies. In politically volatile and economically marginal places like Nicaragua, the development of functioning clinical health systems has been frustrated by the fact that the elaboration of standard routines tends to outpace the sourcing of material tools. The results of this outpacing include palliative care without painkillers, exams without stethoscopes, and prescriptions without pills. Exchanges of paper, feces, and jokes in the Ciudad Sandino health center are thus akin to what Julie Livingston (2012) calls “improvised medicine,” a creative deviation from protocol that takes place in the absence of the technologies that protocol takes for granted. Improvisation makes clinical medicine collective, rather than individualized, and it promotes *dignitas*, the dignity that comes from the ability to engage in aesthetic genres—for Livingston, joking, storytelling, and washing (Livingston 2012, 6; Pols 2013a).

The term “improvisation” names a particular kind of dramatic “craft.” What made the scene I recounted above a crafted one was that it involved the creative recombination of social, medical, and legal conventions. Stage performers and artisans do not make characters, objects, or foods without some notional script, recipe, or model. What differentiates craft from industrial or mechanical reproduction—and what gives it value—is the stretching, modulation, or annotation of those recipes and scripts (Hallam and Ingold 2007; Paxson 2012). In science and technology studies, the term craft has been used to describe the articulation of shared problems or objects of study—work that, as Joan Fujimura has noted, is “usually considered ‘administrative’” (1996, 11). In the higienistas’ office, bureaucratic work was as much a technical job of measuring,

sampling, and containing as a social activity of “coherence construction” (275). In food, science, and art, craft blurs the lines between laboratory and public life, studio and gallery, farm and table.

Even in relatively affluent places, the obligation of higienistas as institutional actors to adhere to routines regularly clashes with their individual sensitivities to the challenges of food making. As Frédéric Keck (2008) explains, in France, after the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE, or “Mad Cow”) scare in the 1990s, authority over meat safety was transferred from a network of veterinarians with entangled personal and professional ties to farmers to a new, biomedically oriented national bureaucracy focused on “biosecurity.” This shift put strains on small-scale or craft meat producers (Keck 2008, 198; Law and Mol 2008). Even in the absence of food scares, a revival of “local” or “craft” meat and cheese production—often seen in affluent markets as alternatives to an impersonal “global” food system—has posed challenges for regulators. For example, Jenifer Buckley (2015) has shown that in order to bring small-scale producers into new safety regimes, safety inspectors sensitive to the burden that regulations place upon craft producers are learning to develop new working relationships with them. They are adjusting their mode of surveillance and audit to the particularities of artisanal food cultures. In the food safety systems of Europe and the United States, then, “craft” is fast becoming a distinct object of the bureaucratic gaze.

In Nicaragua, by contrast, higienistas seek—indeed, see as essential—intimate, collaborative working relationships with everyone they encounter, from artisans to corporate producers. While North American or European safety inspectors may be seen to be preserving craft producers’ dignity when they seek “pragmatic accommodations” (for example, withholding full enforcement of rules or uniform application of auditing technology), Nicaraguan higienistas

seek to maximize enforcement power while preserving not just producers' dignity, but also their own (Huising and Silbey 2011). In the hygienistas' office, as feces move from the latrine to the laboratory, the line that craft blurs is the one that divides the dignified citizen "self" from the bureaucratic self (Gupta 1995; Kondo 1990). The material crafting of a diagnostic and documentary infrastructure of paper, glass, and plastic joins the crafting of a communicative infrastructure, replete with synonymic play and winks and nods, to render feces into a workable sample (Kockelman 2005).

If craft is the general type of governmental process at play here, then orientation is its Nicaraguan form. Orientation anchors Nicaraguan bureaucratic encounters and their participants in a fragmented urban space, where some people have latrines and others do not, and where some laboratories have petri dishes while others do not. It also anchors those encounters and their participants in a shared temporality, in which the partially fulfilled promise of revolution meets with the uncertain future of free-trade zones and global market integration.⁵ Some 27 years after the end of the revolution in 1990, Nicaragua's public health system remains a point of national pride, even if it can seem comparatively ill equipped.

Since the end of the revolution, Nicaragua has become a place where the state's capacity to test blood, sputum, and serum for the infectious diseases of most concern in global health (HIV, malaria, tuberculosis, and dengue) has been augmented, while the success of day-to-day hygiene remains far from assured. Each morning, sanitary infrastructure has to be transposed from the tattered pages of the General Sanitary Law and onto those ripped up pieces of paper that become official forms. Via the paper and jokes and scissors and language games that convert *caca* into *hece*, a suitable sample comes into being. With this in mind, I turn now to stories of

hygienistas during what they call “fieldwork” to show how orientation operates in their encounters with food producers.

KETCHUP AND THE CRAFT OF INSPECTION

You had to look closely to tell that the modest house was actually a ketchup factory. Its concrete wall, rising seven feet above the cracked sidewalk and broken only by a sturdy metal gate, announced a degree of prosperity greater than those of its neighbors, mostly one-story multifamily homes. It also helped to know, as Doña Felicianita did, that this was a legally registered food-producing business. The impending expiration of that registration was what brought her to the gate.

Doña Felicianita and Doña Mariana were vastly outnumbered and under-resourced: two people tasked with ensuring the hygienic integrity of an economy in which the exchanges of money for food and drink were overwhelmingly dense. On the street where I lived, not far from the ketchup factory, there were three small stores (*pulperías*), a vendor who sold artisanal cheese, two sellers of cooked black beans, and a shop that produced the toasted, spiced corn drink called *pinolillo*. There was no way to account for all this activity, and there was certainly little financial incentive. Along with the economic limitations came technological ones. Hygienistas had few workable methods for verifying the presence of microbes (*microbios*). Indeed, a microbial presence was, to an extent, presumed. What the hygienistas called “orientation” was an effort to manage ongoing relationships *with* microbes. In inspection, that effort was crafted less from available materials than from a communicative repertoire.

When we knocked on the gate of the ketchup factory, its owner, a well-dressed, middle-aged man in shiny shoes and button-down shirt, greeted us with squinted, suspicious eyes. Doña

Feliciana is a short woman, but in this case was able to use her small stature to her advantage, slipping a foot slyly into the gate's opening.

"Let's see (*a ver*). Don..." She fiddled with her clipboard, as if looking for his name, "Don Carlos."

Don Carlos responded. "Ah, here comes MINSA! Is this an official inspection?"

"Yes," Doña Feliciana answered, "a routine inspection for your health certificate. This is the workshop of [Salsas Martinez], no?"

"That's correct, but I asked if this was an *official* inspection. They say that MINSA is kind of a quaint/unserious department (*un departamento un poco folklórico*)." He rubbed his thumb against his fingers, mimicking a nightclub bouncer's silent request for a cash handout, and both he and Doña Feliciana began laughing. In the office encounters, jokes and winks allowed the higienistas to craft regulatory interactions to fit social expectations. In the field, it was sometimes food producers like Don Carlos who initiated this process.

In Nicaragua, as in other parts of Latin America, jokes about the failures of bureaucratic rules to match actual bureaucratic practice are common (Nading 2014). Don Carlos' use of the word *folklórico* referenced a sense not only of quaintness but also of governmental regress. As I learned later, Don Carlos's joke referred to a specific alleged incident of extortion by one of Doña Feliciana's former colleagues. At first blush, then, the term appeared to make light of Doña Feliciana's meager salary, of the possibility of a bribe, and of a "disappointment" that the bureaucracy had failed to fulfill the revolution's promise of modernity and national dignity (Redfield 2016, 174). Since Salsas Martinez was what Nicaraguans refer to as an "artisanal brand" (*marca artesanal*), the joke also signaled a kind of an aspiration. By submitting to inspection, Don Carlos and his business might shift from making "artisanal" ketchup to

producing it in a more standardized fashion. Paradoxically, then, a well-crafted communicative encounter might help the business transcend craft production.

The scene continued as Doña Feliciana moved inside to observe how the employees sterilized glass bottles and prepared stainless steel vats for boiling tomatoes, sugar, vinegar, and spices. Her inspections were rigidly structured. The fieldwork of *hygienistas* is a kind of meta-labor, or labor about labor. It involves surveillance of workers and their supervisors for adherence to regulations regarding clothing, hand washing, equipment, and sterilization. Like other officials in Nicaragua whom I observed inspecting public and private spaces (whether in the name of pest control, sanitation, or child-custody claims), Doña Feliciana first toured the perimeter of the facility, working counterclockwise (Nading 2014). Next, she moved to the interior, insisting that the workers at each cooking vat, each cleaning area, and each bottling and labeling station continue in their tasks while she watched. Finally, she completed the inspection sheet, including the name, address, and type of business, as well as a detailed narrative report of her findings. In her report, she cited a cook for failing to wear long sleeves and noted a buildup of garbage in one corner, yet like Doña Mariana at the bakery, she also listened as those she inspected shared their concerns. The workers told her about the stifling heat, and the cost (to Don Carlos's time and their productivity) of frequent hand washing. In a scene reminiscent of Doña Mariana's conversation with the baker, Doña Feliciana turned to Don Carlos and lightly cajoled him to give his employees a few more minutes every hour for water and rest.

Salsas Martinez was not a hermetically sealed environment by any means. Microbes could infiltrate its products through the open air that filtered into the facility, through uncovered and unwashed hands, and through unhatted heads. More than likely, the little factory would fail a health inspection in the United States or Europe. But in a few minutes, Don Carlos and Doña

Feliciana seemed to reach an agreement that the practices there were “very clean” (*bien limpio*): good enough, on the right track (cf. Buckley 2015). They did this mostly through engagement in “aesthetic genres,” and—Don Carlos’s opening joke about bribery notwithstanding—gift exchange was one of these (Pols 2013a).

At the end of the visit, Don Carlos offered Doña Feliciana a few bottles of sauce. Nicaraguans know their ketchup, and Salsas Martinez produced one of middling quality. In its ideal form, ketchup is thick, deep red in color, and (in Nicaragua, anyway) more sweet than tart. Don Carlos would skimp on the thickener and the sugar in favor of cheaper vinegars and milder spices. In Nicaraguan households, if not in traditional recipe books, ketchup is a key ingredient in the dishes that constitute “home cooking” (*comida casera*), the craft that was an absent presence in all of Doña Feliciana’s inspections. These include *pollo tapado*, stovetop-cooked chicken with vegetables and ketchup; *arroz a la valenciana*, a variation on *paella*, made pinkish-red not by saffron but by the addition of ketchup; and even braised beefsteak, or *bistec encebollado*.

Framed by the joke about bribery, *this* gift of ketchup, in *this* context, made sense. Like the *picos* Doña Mariana received from the baker, the ketchup was, in a word, tasteful. Besides, Doña Feliciana told me, she enjoyed visiting Don Carlos. She accepted his gift with a smile, and, after confirming that his employees possessed individual health certificates, she presented him with his sanitary license. The ketchup mimicked the bribe referenced by the joke, but whereas bribes conceal substandard or illegal behavior, the ketchup “condensed” shared ideas about dignified behavior (Tracy 2013, 440). In Doña Feliciana’s line of work, jokes about bribery were routine. They were *meta-commentaries* on the *meta-labor* of hygiene work. At one level, they referred to a possible dysfunctional economic exchange (a bribe), which undermined the dignity

of the state. At another level, they referred to a possible dysfunctional *metabolic* exchange (between germs and people), which undermined the food economy. Taken with a garnish of ketchup, Don Carlos's joke reaffirmed a moral and material order by playfully reversing it (Basso 1979).

In terms more specific to Nicaraguan labor, such joking reinforces the value of dignified work (*trabajo digno*). As Josh Fisher (2013, 552) explains, Nicaraguans consider work to be dignified when it is both non-exploitative and un-corrupt. This form of dignity is akin to what Pols (2013a, 2013b) calls *dignitas*, a quality that emerges from social and communicative exchange. These exchanges moor governmental concerns about the circulation of objects, including but not limited to microbes, to shared social values. The circulation of those objects, however, is rarely directly observable. In Fisher's example, Nicaraguan workers in a fledgling "fair-trade" apparel factory distinguished the dignity of everyday work from the fairness of international economic exchanges from which they felt detached (Besky 2014; Fisher 2013). The microbes that might adulterate food and harm working bodies circulate through machinery, pipes, bottles, and dirt: the infrastructure that marks "the frontline of norms" (Redfield 2016, 160). Although tools of observation were in short supply, concern about microbial circulation could still be produced through the exchange of tasteful gifts, and the equally charged joking about distasteful ones. The ketchup became a kind of "shorthand reference" for the quality of the work in the factory and of the bureaucratic encounter (Tracy 2013, 440). In orientation, the willing acceptance of a gift of "good food" is essential to the crafting of "good governance."

ARTISAN TO INDUSTRIAL, *OFFICIAL TO FOLKLÓRICO*

Since the end of the revolution, Nicaragua has become a node in the global economy of food and other consumer goods. Multilateral and bilateral trade agreements have ushered a

growth in the number of free-trade zones, where low-paid workers produce apparel (Méndez 2005). Multinational retailers like Wal-Mart have converted regional vendors like Palí and La Unión into local outposts, complete with an array of brand-name items and staffed by low-wage workers. Despite the anti-globalization rhetoric the FSLN has publicly adopted since its return to power in 2006, this uneven market integration persists. Doña Feliciana's work in places like Salsas Martinez may have affirmed the state's historical support for "artisans" who did dignified work, but the higienistas also had to try to orient multinational food makers to the General Sanitary Law (Field 1999). At least twice a year, she and Doña Mariana were called upon to inspect a distribution warehouse operated by Unilever, maker of popular ketchups, as well as an astoundingly high number of the best-recognized foods, cosmetics, and drinks in Nicaragua.

The Unilever campus was quite a haven from the dusty barrios of Ciudad Sandino. It had a pool, a grass lawn, a cafeteria, and a fully equipped, air-conditioned employee gym. To my eyes, Doña Feliciana was much more detailed in her inspection of Unilever than of most other places she visited, checking for plastic bags and covers in all of the office rubbish bins, for example, and insisting on a reorganization of one corner of the small warehouse to prevent the exposure of packages to dirt and water in the event of a flood. She even noted in her report a stray piece of toilet paper that had found its way into a urinal in a men's restroom. The Unilever managers, for their part, were almost comically compliant. The woman who was leading us around the campus carried a digital camera to snap photos of the offending urinals and bins. Gone was the collaborative search for cleanliness I had witnessed at Salsas Martinez. Gone, indeed, was almost every sign of microbial intrusion. Still present, however, were the abiding concerns about dignity.

On the inner wall of the Unilever campus was a mural that depicted a version of the Iwo Jima memorial located in Washington, DC (Figure 1). In place of the United States flag was a flag bearing the Unilever logo, and instead of US troops, the men hoisting it appeared vaguely to resemble Nicaraguan Sandinista guerrillas, their heads covered by homemade balaclavas, known in Nicaragua as *pasamontañas*. The image was annotated with the words “United for Conquest” (*Unidos para conquistar*), and just to the outside of it was a more familiar industrial sign that read “zone of security” (*zona de seguridad*). Aimed at the people *inside* the complex, the mural mixed multiple referents. It filtered corporate unity through revolutionary memory and, curiously, US iconography. After I snapped a picture of this mural, I was told that I would not be allowed to take any more photos. Only the supervisor would visually document the visit.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

Alongside this overt form of aesthetic orientation, token gift exchange also reappeared. When Doña Feliciano sat down in the cafeteria to write her report, she and I were treated to a chocolate cereal shake and a plate of snacks. The tone of these gifts felt different from that of the ketchup gift at Salsas Martinez. Unilever’s representative was herself a physician, an occupational health specialist. As we drank our shakes, the doctor explained how she kept tabs on the employees, including on who was going to exercise in the company gym. She said that she “prescribed” exercise to the facility’s overweight employees. Her job was to match the bodily aesthetic of the personnel to that of the corporation: smooth, sleek, streamlined.

While the scene at Salsas Martinez was one of bureaucrats working with management to craft a situation in which they could express concern for laborers while also observing them, the

scene at Unilever was something of a reversal. As a purveyor of foodstuffs produced around the world, Unilever was subject to sanitary protocols that, while they might not have been stricter than those of the Nicaraguan state, were enforced by a global quality assurance system with a sophistication that almost certainly exceeded Nicaragua's own street-level capacity. At Unilever, jars and packages were factory sealed. Each item carried an expiration date. Unilever was not simply complying with hygienic law. It was complying in excess of what could reasonably be expected outside its walls, in sites like Salsas Martinez.

Unilever filled a glaring microbial vacuum with a surfeit of gifts. At the end of the visit, the doctor presented Doña Feliciano with a free box of brand-name Rexona soap, shampoo, and conditioner. This gift was not just for Doña Feliciano, she warned, but for all the women who worked in the local health center. The soaps were devices for "killing germs," of course, but they were also tools for participating in aesthetic genres of feminine beauty (Pols 2013b). They were tools for cultivating a body in the image both of Unilever's ubiquitous advertisements and of its hyper-fit managers. I saw unbalanced reciprocity here, yet from the perspective of the hygienistas, Unilever *did* seem exemplary, both in generosity and in hygiene.

Then, a few weeks later, I was in the hygienistas' office. Doña Feliciano was in poor spirits. One of the health center's staff nurses had pointed out that the shampoos and other personal care products the Unilever doctor gave them were past their expiration dates. Doña Feliciano had distributed a tainted gift. The insult to Doña Feliciano's dignity was clear. For Unilever, the products were as good as waste.

Indeed, the power of the doctor's gift was its non-capitalist valence. It no longer had potential as a market item, but it could still be useful for crafting a relationship between the corporation, the community, and the state. The hygienistas, whose need to cultivate clean bodies

(in order to be dignified, rather than “quaint,” to use Don Carlos’s terms), made the gift of brand-name soap too tempting to refuse. The status of the shampoo as a bribe and not a crafted gesture affirming mutual respect, however, only became apparent over time. Instead of “condensing” a close relationship between good governance and good food, the gift divorced the two (Tracy 2013).

Unilever was “doing the right thing” legally and technically, but compliance, in this case, was insufficient. In what might be called a counter-orientation, the practices that Doña Feliciano worked to establish as *official* in Salsas Martinez became *folklórico*, or quaint, at Unilever. Unilever and its doctor-manager deployed their own kind of communicative craft to put Doña Feliciano in her place. Doña Feliciano’s role as exponent of state surveillance became redundant, in part because of the corporation’s ability to insulate itself from the rest of the community while also maintaining economic and social ties through gifts and displays of “security” (Welker 2014). As much as the wall and the mural, the manager’s act of counter-orientation put Unilever’s operation both inside the liberalizing national economy and beyond the reach of the state.

ON DIGNITY, QUALITY, AND LABELS

Despite the humiliating encounter at Unilever, the higienistas did not change their overall approach to food safety. Bureaucratic work continued to be crafted through joking, gifts, and other kinds of exchanges.

In 2015 I returned to Ciudad Sandino’s hygiene office, and I mentioned to Doña Feliciano my recollections of our visit, years before, to Salsas Martinez. Coincidentally, she was scheduled that week to see Don Carlos and present him with his renewed sanitary license. On our way to the facility, she told me that I would be impressed with its continued success. The

operation was larger, and the variety of products was much greater. The open-air cooking facilities were better sealed, bottling was partially mechanized, and most importantly, Don Carlos was assigning each new container its own lot number, allowing him to track the products' shelf-lives and thereby legally sell them not just in his own retail shop (where he also sold his own line of familiar-smelling pine and lemon-scented cleaners), but also in local supermarkets, including Palí, the Wal-Mart subsidiary.

Salsas Martinez was a food safety success story, written in terms both particular to the Nicaraguan context and generalizable to global standards that depend upon the accountability of the factory seal and the expiration date. The expiration labels on his products—like their scents and flavors—had begun to mirror the technological and temporal aesthetic of large corporations like Unilever. Closer adherence to hygienic standards helped draw Don Carlos not exactly into competition with Unilever but into a similar economic territory. The quality of Don Carlos' work, like that of Unilever's, continued to be assessed through orientation.

As Doña Mariana explained to me on that day, the Nicaraguan government used to fund an office that independently tested food safety. In the past, higienistas could pass random food samples on to MINSA technicians, who looked for signs of adulteration through laboratory tests. This testing program, like so many remains of the revolutionary health system, had been defunct since its lead scientist retired a decade earlier. For food producers small and large, food safety had to be crafted through a collaboration that included the forging of dignified relationships with the state through long-term exchanges of gifts and goodwill.

Orientation succeeded in places like Salsas Martinez because of, not despite, the ultimate impossibility that the higienistas could fully account for the unbalanced, patchy distribution of microbes in the landscape. Orientation turned the small factory into a space of dignified work

(and dignified food), not only for Don Carlos, his employees, and Ciudad Sandino's consumers, but also for the higienistas themselves (Fisher 2013; Paxson 2012). Salsas Martinez was still an "artisanal" brand, if well on its way to becoming an industrial one. For now, however, its products wouldn't travel much farther than the shelves of the local Pali. To get his products to market, Don Carlos would still have to craft good relations with state bureaucrats. Even when it failed, as it did at Unilever, orientation remained essential to bureaucratic craft. As a pragmatic form of temporal, legal, and geographical sense making, it pointed food makers and food monitors along a path to better relations, better taste, and better government.

CONCLUSION

Attention to the crafting of bureaucratic encounters reveals how seemingly universal concepts such as dignity might be more diverse than we first assume (Fischer 2014; Fisher 2013, 252; Keane 2015; Tsing 2000, 352). Though it is tempting to view food safety in a place like Ciudad Sandino as a series of failures or missed connections, attention to orientation gives us good reason to see it otherwise. The case of the higienistas prompts us to imagine food safety not only as technical surveillance or population protection but also as an effort to craft spaces of "dignified work" (Fisher 2013, 252). As Redfield argues, "'governments' . . . are as much objects of desire and disappointment as conventions of political order" (2016, 174). If this is the case, then maybe it should not be surprising that desire and disappointment "[fasten] onto material systems, and civilizational markers like sanitation" (174). Higienistas, like other street-level bureaucrats (and, indeed, anthropologists), "interpret and author social worlds according to formal and informal codes of conduct" (Hoag 2011, 84). Even if bureaucracy is an "objectivity machine," as Colin Hoag (2011, 89) puts it, my argument here has been that its objectivity must always emerge through craft, not despite it (Hoag 2014; Puig de la Bellacasa 2011).

While anthropological work on bureaucracy reminds us that balancing the duty to express care for citizens with a duty to survey and account for them is always a struggle, the role of the state in health has largely been illuminated through research with clinical providers and policymakers, rather than bureaucrats (Gupta 2012; Hetherington 2011; Singh 2015). Research in clinics has resulted in its own extended discussion of “care,” a form of sociality that works across “incommensurate experience”—for example, between patients and providers, or between parents and children (Garcia 2010, 50; Han 2012; Livingston 2012). Orientation is related to care, but it is distinct in that it is a way of locating and affirming *commensurate* experience. This commensurate experience is both one of collective political memory and one of eating and feeding in a landscape where the industrial and the artisanal commingle. The higienistas orient themselves to both a bygone revolution and to a present in which brands of ketchup and other foods are proliferating thanks to the partial integration of that revolution’s legacy, including its bureaucratic vestiges, into the global market (Babb 2001).

It is also tempting to see orientation as a form of “coping” in conditions where the presence of foodborne pathogens combines with a fragile economy and shaky government to make public health a chronic source of uncertainty (Narotzky and Besnier 2014, S6). As I have argued, practices such as orientation should be seen as crafted efforts to ensure quality governance rather than, as in coping, an ad-hoc means of tolerating suboptimal conditions, or as in bribery, efforts to conceal irregular or illicit behavior. The routines of street-level health bureaucrats like higienistas, the legal maneuvers of Paraguayan *campesinos* (Hetherington 2011), and the attempts of Cuban citizens to enact “universal health care” (Brotherton 2012) all show how audits and accounts, even when tethered to notions of universal value, never escape the historically particular constraints set by aesthetic genres of taste, dress, exchange, and

etiquette (Pols 2013b; Yates-Doerr 2015). My suggestion that bureaucracy can be crafted does not excuse the structural violence inherent in a fractured state, whether that fracture comes by way of a transition from colonialism or by way of post-revolutionary hangover (Dunn 2008; Gupta 2012; Street 2012). Rather, my aim here has been to highlight how, given the continued global push for more regulation and transparency in food safety, human rights, and the economy, the application of legal and regulatory standards must be creatively and actively articulated with particular ideas of dignity, seen as the capacity to participate in aesthetic genres (Pols 2013a; Sayer 2011).

This is most obvious in the figure of the street-level bureaucrat. Amid failed or fractured sanitation, imperfect metrics, and systematic inattention to everyday violence, calls for better accounting and transparency persist, even if such calls tend to demonize bureaucracy itself as the wrong place to foster these values. One could easily become cynical about this trend, especially given the patchy success of recent experiments with a return to state-centric social democracy across Latin America. The stories of the higienistas, however, offer a modest example of the potential for routine bureaucratic encounters to become spaces for a more expansive—and perhaps more aesthetically oriented—understanding of what it means to enact good governance.

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NOTES

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¹ In this way, orientation highlights the relational, affective, and intersubjective content of what scholars of bureaucracy, following Foucault (2010), sometimes call “the conduct of conduct.”

² Anthropologists have consistently portrayed spaces of labor as sites where collective notions of dignity are articulated (Ferguson 2013; Fischer 2014, 208; Fisher 2013; Narotzky 2016).

³ In Latin America, the ability to participate in these kinds of activities is often signified in the body. Values around weight, appearance, and other bodily conditions index not just a medicalized notion of health but also collective and locally variable notions of dignity (Han 2012; Yates-Doerr 2015).

⁴ In Nicaragua, May 4 marks the “Day of National Dignity,” the date on which revolutionary hero Augusto César Sandino began his guerilla crusade against American imperialism.

⁵ A spatio-temporal orientation has been noted among contemporary Cubans, who work to resolve a disconnect between expectations of the state drawn from revolutionary memory and the reality that the state’s technical capabilities in the present are limited (Brotherton 2012; see also Wendland 2012).

FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. A mural located inside the Unilever facility in Ciudad Sandino. (Photograph by author)